



CHICAGO JOURNALS

Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

The Brand Positivity Effect: When Evaluation Confers Preference

Author(s): Steven S. Posavac, David M. Sanbonmatsu, Frank R. Kardes, and Gavan J. Fitzsimons

Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (December 2004), pp. 643-651

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/425099>

Accessed: 28/03/2013 10:11

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and *Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Consumer Research*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Brand Positivity Effect: When Evaluation Confers Preference

STEVEN S. POSAVAC
DAVID M. SANBONMATSU
FRANK R. KARDES
GAVAN J. FITZSIMONS*

One of the most common forms of consumer judgment is singular evaluation: the evaluation or appraisal of singular brands. Three experiments show that singular evaluation is often characterized by a brand positivity effect—brands tend to be evaluated more positively than warranted when judged in isolation. In addition to demonstrating how the brand positivity effect may bias consumer judgments of and choice intention regarding products in very different categories, we demonstrate how the brand positivity effect influences real consumer choice in a mall intercept study. Finally, we provide evidence that selective processing of brand information underlies the brand positivity effect.

One of the most common forms of consumer judgment is singular evaluation—the evaluation or appraisal of singular products or brands. For example, a consumer whose attention is drawn to a brand displayed on an end cap may deliberate if the brand is worthy of purchase. Similarly, the assessment of a particular brand of automobile and the appraisal of the wisdom of a firm's leadership are both instances of singular evaluation. The concern in such judgments is neither in determining which member of a category is best or worst, nor with how the focal target compares to any particular alternative target. Rather, interest is in the absolute favorableness or worth of a focal object, whether it is a brand, firm, person, event, action, or position.

Although the accuracy of consumer judgments may be maximized by a comparison of the focal object with all other members of the relevant category, consumers instead may often opt for a strategy of selective assessment in which the focal object is judged in isolation. That is, rather than make explicit comparisons between a focal object and other alternatives within the category, consumers instead may assess

the worth of the focal object by trying to estimate its absolute utility based on their knowledge and perceptions of it. The value of a singular or selective processing strategy to the consumer is that it is faster and less cognitively demanding than a fully comparative strategy in which multiple iterative comparisons are made between the focal object and intra-category competitors.

Research on the underutilization of base-rate and consensus information (Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett 1980; Kahneman and Tversky 1973), probability overestimation (Robinson and Hastie 1985), and numerous other judgmental errors (Sanbonmatsu et al. 1998) suggests that singular evaluation may be the rule of consumer judgment, and comparative evaluation the exception (see Dhar, Nowlis, and Sherman 1999). For example, Brenner, Koehler, and Tversky (1996) conducted a series of experiments in which subjects were either given one side or both sides of a legal dispute, and then were asked to predict the outcome of the case. Subjects presented with arguments for only one side of the case tended to predict that that side would be successful because their judgments were rendered based on the presented arguments, whereas arguments for the opposing side, while normatively relevant, were neither generated nor considered. Kardes et al. (2002) demonstrated that consumers typically are overly favorable toward a given consideration set because they neglect consideration of brands not present in the set.

In this article, three experiments are reported that explore the consequences of singular evaluation on consumers' judgments of products, choice intentions, and actual choices in very different categories. Each of the experiments demon-

*Steven S. Posavac is associate professor of marketing at the Simon School of Business, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627 (posavac@simon.rochester.edu). David M. Sanbonmatsu is professor of psychology at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112 (sanbonmatsu@psych.utah.edu). Frank R. Kardes is professor of marketing at the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221 (frank.kardes@uc.edu). Gavan J. Fitzsimons is associate professor of marketing at the Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708 (gavan@duke.edu). Correspondence: Steven Posavac. Thanks are due to the editor, associate editor, and reviewers for their helpful comments, Joško Brakus for assistance in data coding, and Vincent Hope for assistance in data collection. The first two authors are listed alphabetically.

strates brand positivity effects—the tendency for singular evaluations of products and brands to result in overly positive assessments. That is, a brand positivity effect occurs when a brand is evaluated more positively because it has been the target of singular evaluation. We demonstrate this tendency by showing that randomly selected focal brands are rated more favorably than the average favorableness of a set of brands from which the focal brand was drawn, and provide conceptual and mediational evidence of the process by which singular brand evaluations come to be overly favorable.

SELECTIVE HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND OVERLY FAVORABLE SINGULAR BRAND EVALUATIONS

We suggest that consumers' tendency to engage in selective hypothesis testing may lead them to form singular brand evaluations that are overly favorable. Selective hypothesis testing is a framework forwarded by Sanbonmatsu et al. (1998) that explains a host of judgmental tendencies delineated by researchers working in a variety of fields (see also Klayman and Ha 1987; Mussweiler 2003). In this framework, hypotheses include estimations, interpretations, evaluations, explanations, rules, or solutions formed in response to a judgmental problem. The most accurate judgmental strategy is to generate all possible hypotheses about what the best solution or answer may be, evaluate evidence regarding each hypothesis, and then make a conclusion based on the relative merits of each hypothesis. In contrast to this normative fully comparative strategy, individuals instead often adopt a much more selective hypothesis testing strategy in which they evaluate the merits of one hypothesis at a time. Specifically, individuals typically will search for evidence that, if found, will support the focal hypothesis. Evidence that is either inconsistent with the hypothesis or supportive of competing hypotheses is typically neglected. These biases in information gathering, coupled with tendencies to assimilate and interpret information in a manner consistent with the focal hypothesis, converge to facilitate individuals prematurely concluding that the focal hypothesis is correct or best.

Singular evaluation of a focal consumer product may be likely to prompt a process of selective hypothesis testing. Sanbonmatsu et al. (1998) note that the specific hypotheses that individuals consider are often prompted by the decision making context. Thus, because consumers are motivated to hold correct attitudes and make satisfying decisions, they may be likely to evaluate the products to which their attention is drawn (e.g., by an ad, an end-cap display, or the product itself) through a hypothesis testing process. What, though, what will the nature of the hypothesis be? Because consumers' interest is often in finding good options, the fact that most brands are good at least in performing their most basic functions, and the vehicle by which brands typically become focal suggests that the brand is favorable (ads, or product packaging), consumers may typically evaluate a fo-

cal brand by testing the hypothesis that the focal brand is favorable (if a consumer is motivated by something other than finding a good brand, for example impression management, a different hypothesis may be tested).

Similarly to the judgmental processes noted by Sanbonmatsu et al. (1998), so long as favorable evidence about the brand is available, consumers may be likely to conclude that a focal brand is superior to the extent that they selectively process information about that brand and neglect information about alternate brands. If the hypothesis testing process does lead the consumer to confirm the hypothesis that the brand is superior, s/he may update attitudes and/or form a purchase intention.

Although our focus is on why singular brand evaluations are likely to be overly favorable, we believe that selective hypothesis testing may provide an explanation for why positivity effects have been noted in a wide range of prior research. For example, attitude polarization, the term that describes the phenomenon when individuals are prompted to think carefully about an attitude object, the attitude becomes more extreme in its initial direction (e.g., Sadler and Tesser 1973), may occur because individuals asked to think about an object may test the hypothesis that their original attitude is correct. Thus, selective information processing will lead to evidence being generated and integrated in a manner consistent with the initial attitude, information suggesting a different evaluative implication will be neglected, and accordingly the resultant attitude is likely to become more extreme in the direction of the initial attitude.

Similarly, the better-than-average effect, which describes the tendency for perceptions of target individuals (e.g., the self, members of a group) to be better than the average member of the category to which the individual belongs (Klar and Giladi 1997), may also be driven by selective hypothesis testing processes. Specifically, when asked to rate a favorable target such as oneself or a member of an in-group, individuals may be likely to selectively process information about the target while neglecting consideration of characteristics about the category or its other members. As a result, judgments formed toward the target are likely to be more favorable than the group average.

The selective hypothesis testing framework may also shed light on the processes underlying results reported by Hsee and Leclerc (1998). These authors conducted a series of experiments in which hypothetical brands were described by values on two attributes, such that one brand was always superior on one of the attributes and worse on the other. Both brands were either generally favorable or unfavorable, as the authors either provided explicit reference attribute levels or set attribute levels of both brands that were obviously very good or very bad based on consumers' category knowledge. When subjects were asked to judge favorable brands by themselves versus judge both brands, judgments (willingness to pay and choice intention) were more positive. In contrast, judgments were more negative when unfavorable brands were judged by themselves versus when both brands were judged simultaneously.

While Hsee and Leclerc (1998) did not provide evidence of the process by which their effects obtained, it seems likely that selective processing guided their participants' judgments. When a brand is evaluated alone, a consumer may be likely to focus on processing attributes of the brand. For Hsee and Leclerc's participants, processing would be straightforward—cursory inspection of the two presented attribute levels would reveal that the target brand was either good or bad. However, to the extent that participants engaged in selective processing, they would neglect that the other brand presented also was either good or bad, and thus judgments would tend to be extreme. When comparative processing was necessitated by the requirement to jointly evaluate both brands, recognition of the relative liabilities of the favorable brands and the relative advantages of the unfavorable brands led to more moderate judgments.

A selective processing account is not inconsistent with the logic Hsee and Leclerc presented, but instead, our view is that selective hypothesis testing subsumes the attribute cognizance effects they report. While a selective processing account would predict Hsee and Leclerc's results, it also suggests that specific attribute information need not be presented for extremity effects to obtain. More specifically, we would expect that whenever selective versus comparative processing is likely, overly favorable judgments and choice likelihood of a focally considered brand will be more likely, even if no attribute information is presented, and no reference point is given. Moreover, we would expect a different outcome than that reported by Hsee and Leclerc when the likelihood of selective processing in singular product judgments is reduced. Specifically, if elements of the decision context inhibit selective processing, singular brand judgments will be less likely to be extreme.

If we are correct that selective hypothesis testing may drive a brand positivity effect, we would expect that the extent to which consumers engage in selective processing of information about the focal brand would predict the positivity of their brand judgments. That is, to the extent that a consumer engages in selective processing, the brand positivity effect should be particularly likely. Moreover, if selective hypothesis testing is the process by which the brand positivity effect obtains, hypotheses about variables that may serve as moderators may be generated. Specifically, we would expect that any factor that reduces the likelihood of selective processing of brand information would reduce the likelihood or magnitude of the brand positivity effect.

Two ecologically important potential moderators of brand positivity effects in singular evaluations are cognitive load and contextual prompting of the consideration of alternatives to a focal brand. Even if a singular evaluation is being made, there may not be a positivity effect if consumers' ability to engage in selective information processing is hampered. For example, although seeing an advertisement for a product of personal relevance may be likely to prompt selective processing, if a consumer is distracted, s/he may not be able to devote sufficient resources to engage in processing ad and brand information, and thus his/her evaluations may not

be overly favorable. More generally, under conditions of high cognitive load consumers will be less able to engage in selective hypothesis testing of the favorableness of a focal option, and positivity effects would thus be expected to be ameliorated.

A second potential moderator is contextual facilitation of the consideration of alternatives to a focal brand. Context may induce consideration of multiple possibilities, for example, when consumers examine brand values on a multiattribute grid such as those often presented in *Consumer Reports*, or if they see a comparative ad. If a focal brand is evaluated in a context in which consideration of competing brands is facilitated, processing may be more comparative, and evaluations thus may be less likely to be characterized by a positivity effect (thus underscoring the importance of creating a particularly compelling comparison if a comparative advertising strategy is employed; see Jain and Posavac 2004).

OVERVIEW OF THE EXPERIMENTS

Three experiments were conducted to demonstrate that singular brand evaluations tend to be more extreme than justified. Moreover, we sought to provide evidence that selective hypothesis testing underlies this effect, and to delineate important factors that moderate it. In our first experiment we sought to provide an initial demonstration of the brand positivity effect, and demonstrate the moderating roles of cognitive load and prompted consideration of alternatives to a focal brand.

While findings results supportive of our moderation hypotheses in experiment 1 would strongly implicate selective hypothesis testing as the process underling the brand positivity effect, much more compelling evidence would be provided by an experiment in which selective processing is measured, and when statistically controlled, eliminates positivity effects. Experiment 2 was conducted to replicate the brand positivity effect, and to provide such direct evidence of the mediational role of selective processing.

The first two experiments were carefully controlled studies using college students in which judgments were necessarily measured before choice intentions were stated (i.e., so that the attitude measures would not be corrupted; see Quattrone 1985). Experiment 3 was a mall intercept study conducted to demonstrate that the brand positivity effect has implications for real consumer choices and to extend the purchase intention findings of the first two experiments by showing that increasing the likelihood of consideration of alternatives decreases brand positivity effects in choice. Additionally, by focusing only on choice, the third experiment rules out concerns regarding self-generated validity with regard to the choice intention measures of first two experiments (i.e., that the choice intention measures were contaminated by the earlier judgment items), as well as other potential alternate explanations of the results.

EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 had multiple purposes, the first of which was to establish that consumers' judgments of singular options are typically overly positive, that is, more favorable than the average brand in a set of brands belonging to the same category. Additionally, the experiment aimed to delineate cognitive load and prompted consideration of alternatives as moderators of the brand positivity effect. We expected that default singular judgments (i.e., when cognitive capacity is unconstrained and consideration of alternatives is not prompted) would exhibit brand positivity effects, but that if consumers were either constrained with respect to cognitive capacity, or prompted to consider alternatives to a focal option, that positivity effects would be either absent or reduced. The hypotheses tested were the following:

- H1:** Consumers' judgments and choice intentions regarding a singular brand will be overly positive when cognitive capacity is unconstrained and consideration of alternatives is not prompted.
- H2:** If either cognitive constraint is imposed, or consumers are prompted to consider alternatives to a focal option, the brand positivity effect will be reduced or eliminated.

Participants

Fifty-eight undergraduates (30 females, 28 males) enrolled in a large private northeastern university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Gender was not related to any of the effects reported below, and thus is not discussed further.

Procedure

Students were recruited for a study of consumer attitudes and participated in the experiment individually in a laboratory setting. Participants were told that the study concerned perceptions of chains of hotels and that to keep students' time at a minimum each student would be rating one randomly determined hotel chain. They were further instructed that they would be rating one of four hotel chains that a recent consumer survey had identified as the best four chains. Finally, they were told that in addition to the main purpose of this study, the experiment was also designed to examine the rate of blinking in American consumers.

The experiment was a 2 (consideration of alternatives to a focal brand prompted: yes/no) \times 2 (cognitive capacity: constrained/unconstrained) between-subjects design. In the prompt condition participants were informed of the four best hotel chains as revealed in the consumer survey, then instructed which hotel chain was randomly selected for them to rate. In the no prompt condition participants were simply

informed of the focal chain that they would be subsequently rating.

Cognitive capacity was manipulated using a distraction paradigm that focuses participant attention on a secondary task, thereby reducing the participants' ability to engage in elaborative processing related to the primary task (e.g., Jacoby 1998). The specific distraction task employed was an eye-blink tracking task in which the participant is asked to keep a running sum of the number of times an irregularly occurring behavior occurs: namely, the number of times they blink (Fitzsimons and Williams 2000). If assigned to the unconstrained cognitive capacity conditions participants completed the blink-counting task prior to rating the focal hotel chain. If assigned to the constrained cognitive capacity conditions participants continued to track their blinks as they responded to the questions about hotels.

For the first judgmental query participants were asked to indicate where the focal hotel chain ranked among the four best hotel chains by indicating if they thought the focal hotel was the best, second best, third best, or fourth best. The next items on the survey were three nine-point Likert items measuring opinions about the focal hotel anchored by 1 = very bad and 9 = very good, 1 = very unfavorable and 9 = very favorable, and 1 = poor quality and 9 = excellent quality. After the opinion items, participants were asked to suppose that they would be traveling in the near future and planning to stay at a first-class hotel and to respond to two items measuring the likelihood that they would stay at the focal hotel. The first item was a nine-point Likert item anchored by 1 = not at all likely and 9 = extremely likely. The second item asked participants to estimate the likelihood that they would stay at the focal hotel by indicating a percentage. Finally, participants were asked to respond to a suspicion check.

Results and Discussion

To check that participants followed our divided attention instructions, a comparison was made between the number of reported blinks for those in the normal cognitive capacity versus constrained capacity conditions. Participants in the unconstrained cognitive capacity conditions, while performing the blink-counting manipulation, completed the task prior to being asked the questions about the focal hotel. By contrast, participants in the constrained capacity conditions continued the blink-counting task for a considerably longer period. As expected, participants in the normal capacity conditions reported a lower mean number of blinks ($M = 5.2$) versus for the constrained capacity conditions ($M = 28.7$), $F(1, 56) = 35.3$, $p < .0001$.

Initial analyses explored whether there were brand positivity effects in each of the experimental conditions. To determine if the ranking data were consistent with our hypothesis that the focal hotel brand would be judged overly positively when cognitive capacity was unconstrained and consideration of alternatives was not prompted, we compared the distribution of participants' ranks in this condition with the expected distribution if the manipulation of focal

brand had no effect on judgment. Specifically, if the manipulation of which brand was focal did not influence participants' evaluations of the focal brand, ranks should be evenly distributed across the four possible ranks. Consistent with hypothesis 1, there was a brand positivity effect in the normal capacity/no prompt condition as participants were more favorable to the focal hotel (10, 4, 1, and 0 participants ranked the focal brand as best, second best, third best, and fourth best, respectively) than would be expected if the manipulation of focal brand had no effect (15/4, or 3.75, participants reporting each ranking), $\chi^2 (n = 15, df = 3) = 16.2, p = .001$.

Although rankings appeared to be directionally more positive than the expected null hypothesis distribution, significant brand positivity effects were not observed in the remaining conditions: normal capacity/prompt (2, 6, 6, and 0 participants ranked the focal brand as best, second best, third best, and fourth best, respectively, vs. expected frequency of 3.5 participants reporting each ranking), $\chi^2 (n = 14, df = 3) = 7.714, p < .06$; constrained capacity/no prompt (4, 5, 5, and 0 respective ranks vs. expected frequency of 3.5 of each rank), $\chi^2 (n = 14, df = 3) = 4.857, p = .18$; constrained capacity/prompt (5, 6, 3, and 1 respective ranks vs. expected frequency of 3.75 of each rank), $\chi^2 (n = 14, df = 3) = 3.933, p = .27$. Because of the low power of these tests, and our hypothesis 2 that either imposing cognitive constraint or prompting consideration of alternatives would reduce the brand positivity effect, in a subsequent test we pooled these three conditions. The pooled distribution (11, 17, 14, and 1 respective ranks) was significantly more favorable than the expected null hypothesis distribution (10.75 participants reporting each ranking), $\chi^2 (n = 43, df = 3) = 13.465, p = .004$.

Analyses of participants' estimated likelihood of staying at the focal hotel also supported hypothesis 1. If the manipulation of which brand was focal did not influence participants' evaluations of the focal brand, the average estimation of stay likelihood would have been 100%/4, or 25%, thus an average estimation higher than 25% constitutes a brand positivity effect. Consistent with hypothesis 1, there was a brand positivity effect in the normal capacity/no prompt condition, $M = 78.9\%$, $t(14) = 17.13, p < .0001$. While the estimations of stay likelihood were lower in the remaining conditions, there were brand positivity effects evident in each: normal capacity/prompt, $M = 61.1\%$, $t(13) = 6.15, p < .0001$; constrained capacity/no prompt, $M = 60.6\%$, $t(13) = 4.03, p = .001$; constrained capacity/prompt, $M = 66.3\%$, $t(14) = 6.63, p < .0001$.

To test hypothesis 2 we conducted a series of contrasts of the normal capacity/no prompt condition versus the remaining conditions. Pooling the conditions in this way is appropriate because for all dependent variables, analyses comparing the conditions except for the normal capacity/no prompt condition were all not significant (for ranks $\chi^2 [n = 43, df = 6] = 4.28, p = .64$, semi-omnibus ANOVAs of attitudes and choice intentions produced F 's < 1). Consistent with our expectations, a Mann-Whitney U dem-

onstrated that rankings were significantly more favorable in the normal capacity/no prompt condition than in the remaining conditions in which either capacity was constrained or consideration of alternatives was prompted, $p = .004$.

The next analyses were conducted to explore between condition effects in the other dependent variables. As the items measuring attitudes toward the focal hotel were highly correlated ($\alpha = .92$), we aggregated these items by adding them, and dividing by three to facilitate interpretation. Similarly, there was a high correlation between the two items measuring participants' likelihood of staying at the focal hotel ($r = .74$), so these variables were transformed into standard scores and aggregated into one variable reflecting choice intent. Similar patterns were observed both for attitudes and for choice intentions as were observed for rankings.

As with hotel rankings, a contrast of hotel attitudes between the normal capacity/no prompt condition ($M = 8.04$) and the remaining conditions (pooled $M = 7.31$) supported hypothesis 2 as attitudes were more favorable when capacity was not constrained and consideration of alternatives was not prompted, $F(1, 54) = 5.95, p = .02$. Similarly, a contrast of the standardized choice intention measure between the normal capacity/no prompt condition ($M = .59$) and the remaining conditions (pooled $M = -.21$) was also significant, $F(1, 54) = 9.30, p = .004$, as participants stated greater purchase intentions when capacity was not constrained and consideration of alternatives was not prompted.

All of these results are consistent with our expectations. When cognitive capacity is unconstrained and consumers are not prompted to consider alternatives to a singular brand to be evaluated, favoritism toward the focal brand is exhibited both with respect to judgments and choice intentions. It appears that when the likelihood of selective processing of information regarding a focal brand is reduced, in this study by either increasing cognitive load or prompting consumers to consider multiple brands, then focal brand favoritism is substantially reduced.

EXPERIMENT 2

Selective processing was implicated as an important process underlying the brand positivity effect in experiment 1 because the potential moderators operated as expected. The primary aim of experiment 2 was to provide more compelling process evidence by measuring selective processing and testing if it mediates the brand positivity effect. Specifically, the experiment featured a manipulation of prompted consideration of alternatives, and explored if selective processing mediated the expected between-condition positivity effects. Experiment 2 thus aimed to replicate hypotheses 1 and 2, and to test a new hypothesis:

- H3:** Selective processing will mediate the effect of prompted consideration of alternatives on the positivity of consumers' judgments and choice intentions.

Participants

Eighty-seven undergraduates (36 females, 51 males) participated in the study. Gender was not appreciably related to any of the effects reported below, and thus is not discussed further.

Procedure

Students were recruited for a study of consumer attitudes, and participated in large group administrations. The procedure closely followed that of experiment 1, with a similar cover story and manipulation of whether participants were informed of the four best hotel chains as revealed in the consumer survey prior to making ratings (prompt condition) or not (no prompt condition).

After receiving initial instructions, participants then were asked to respond to items identical to those of experiment 1. Specifically, they were asked to rank the focal hotel chain among the four best hotel chains, respond to three items measuring their opinions about the focal hotel, and two items measuring choice intention.

To measure the extent to which consumers engaged in selective processing, they were asked to write a few lines describing how they arrived at their responses to the earlier items. Finally, participants responded to a suspicion check.

Results and Discussion

The first analyses explored if there were brand positivity effects in each of the experimental conditions. Consistent with experiment 1, there was a brand positivity effect in the no prompt condition in the hotel rank data as participants were more favorable to the focal hotel (18, 19, 6, and 0 participants ranked the focal hotel as best, second best, third best, and fourth best, respectively) than would be expected if the manipulation of which hotel was focal had no effect (i.e., 10.75 participants reporting each ranking), $\chi^2 (n = 43, df = 3) = 24.07, p < .0001$. Participants in the prompt condition were not overly favorable to the focal hotel, as their ranks (13, 12, 12, and 7 participants ranked the focal hotel as best, second best, third best, and fourth best, respectively) were not significantly different than the null hypothesis expected distribution (i.e., 11 participants reporting each ranking), $\chi^2 (n = 44, df = 3) = 2.00, p = .6$. As in the first experiment, we tested for brand positivity effects in the probability of staying at the focal hotel by comparing means in each condition with the null hypothesis expected value of 25%. Positivity effects were evident in both the no prompt ($M = 72.74\%$, $t(42) = 14.30, p < .0001$) and prompt conditions ($M = 62.48\%$, $t(43) = 8.85, p < .0001$).

The next analyses were conducted to explore between condition effects in the various dependent variables. As in the first experiment the items measuring attitudes toward the focal hotel appeared to be measuring a single construct ($\alpha = .96$), so we aggregated them as before. Similarly, there was a high correlation between the two items measuring participants' likelihood of staying at the focal hotel ($r =$

.85), so these variables were transformed into standard scores and aggregated. All of the between subjects analyses confirm our hypotheses. Specifically, a Mann-Whitney U test demonstrated that rankings in the no prompt condition were more favorable than ranks in the prompt condition, $p = .01$. Moreover, attitudes toward the focal hotel were more favorable in the no prompt condition ($M = 7.9$) than in the prompt condition ($M = 7.1$), $F(1, 85) = 6.50, p = .01$. Finally, choice intentions were higher in the no prompt condition ($M = .22$) than in the prompt condition ($M = -.22$), $F(1, 85) = 4.18, p = .03$.

We had expected that selective processing would mediate these between condition effects. To test this hypothesis we first coded participants' free responses. Each thought a participant noted in her/his free responses was coded by two independent raters as either being, (a) about the focal hotel, (b) a comparative statement (e.g., mentioning the name or an attribute of a nonfocal hotel, or a direct comparison), or (c) irrelevant or otherwise not belonging to either of the first categories. An index of selective processing was created by calculating the proportion of thoughts that were about the focal hotel versus total thoughts. The correlation between the two raters on this index was .95, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. We then conducted a series of ANCOVAs similar to the ANOVAs reported above with selective processing included as a covariate.

The mediation analyses confirmed our expectations. Analysis of the selective processing index indicated significantly more selectivity in the no prompt condition ($M = .65$) than in the prompt condition ($M = .47$), $t(85) = 2.22, p = .03$. When selective processing was included as a covariate in an ANCOVA of attitudes as a function of condition, the effect of condition became nonsignificant, $F(1, 84) = 3.01, p = .09$, and the covariate was significant, $F(1, 84) = 17.88, p < .0001$. A Sobel test (see Iacobucci and Duhachek, forthcoming) confirmed that selective processing mediated the effect of condition on attitudes, $z = -1.96, p = .05$. Analyses of choice intention revealed a similar pattern. An ANCOVA of aggregate choice intention as a function of condition revealed no effect of condition, $F(1, 84) = 1.52, p = .22$, but a significant role of selective processing as a covariate, $F(1, 84) = 16.60, p = .0001$. As with the attitude data, a Sobel test confirmed that selective processing mediated the effect of condition on choice intentions, $z = -2.02, p = .04$. We did not perform mediation analyses on the ordinally scaled rank data.

EXPERIMENT 3

The first two experiments make a clear case that the brand positivity effect characterizes singular judgments of brands and suggest that these judgmental effects may extend to choice. However, some conservatism is warranted regarding the relevance of the choice intention data for actual consumer behavior because real choices were not made. The purpose of experiment 3 was to replicate the choice intention results of the earlier experiments and to explore if brand positivity effects in singular evaluation have implications

for actual choice. The experiment featured a manipulation of whether or not consideration of alternatives to a focal laundry detergent brand was prompted, and we expected to replicate the findings for choice intention reported in the prior experiments. The new hypotheses tested in this experiment were the following:

H4a: When a focal brand is considered in isolation, it will be more likely to be chosen than the average brand in the choice set.

H4b: A focal brand will be more likely to be chosen when considered in isolation than when consideration of alternatives is prompted.

A final purpose of this experiment was to evaluate consumers' perceptions of the number of detergent brands locally available. If consumers perceived that there were only a few brands of detergent, they may be overly positive to a focal brand simply because they are not aware of alternatives. We hoped to discredit this possibility by measuring consumers' knowledge of brands in this experiment.

Participants

Eighty patrons (58 female, 22 male) of an urban shopping mall in the northeast were recruited by a large national marketing research firm, and participated in the study in exchange for \$2. The average age was 37.4, with a range of 18–83. Gender did not interact with any of the dependent variables, and age did not correlate with any of the dependent variables, thus these demographic variables are not discussed further.

Procedure

Mall patrons were recruited to participate in the experiment by fieldworkers of the research firm, which maintains a permanent office in the mall. Patrons participated individually in the experiment in one of the firm's survey rooms. Consumers were informed that they would be participating in a study of consumers' perceptions of laundry detergents. Unlike the prior experiments, in this experiment consumers were asked to use a spinner board to determine which brand they would rate. Specifically, consumers were told, "This is a study about consumers' perceptions of laundry detergents. To keep your time at a minimum, we will be asking you to only rate one brand of detergent. To determine which detergent you will rate, we will be using this spinner board. A list of the four best brands of laundry detergent available in the Rochester area was recently determined by the votes of local consumers. This spinner board contains the first letter of the name of each of these four detergents. Please spin the spinner to determine which brand you will be asked to judge." After receiving these instructions, each consumer spun the spinner on the board, and rated the detergent upon which the spinner stopped. The brands included in this experiment were determined by an earlier mall intercept study

in which patrons were asked to list the top three laundry detergents locally available. The four that were most mentioned were included in the experiment.

Similar to the earlier experiments, consumers were randomly assigned to one of two conditions; consideration of alternatives to a focal brand was either prompted or not prompted. As in earlier experiments, consumers in the no prompt condition were asked to respond to items regarding the focal brand and alternative brands were not mentioned. Consumers in the prompt condition were instructed, "To help you respond to the questions, all four of the best detergents on the market are listed on the questionnaire. The best detergents are All, Cheer, Tide, and Wisk. Please carefully consider each of these detergents while answering the questions." Consumers were given a questionnaire that posed two purchase intention questions. The first question was a nine-point Likert-type item that read, "If you were to buy a laundry detergent today, how likely is it that you would buy [name of detergent]?" and was anchored by 1 = not at all likely and 9 = extremely likely. The second question was a purchase probability estimation question similar to the prior experiments. After responding to these first two questions, consumers were informed that they would receive a single use box of the detergent of their choice to take home as an added incentive for participating in the study. Consumers chose from a list containing the four brands of detergent identified by the pretest to ensure that all four brands would be included in consumers' consideration sets.

After the dependent variables were measured, consumers were asked to indicate how many brands of detergent they thought were available locally and then to respond to a series of demographic items and to complete a suspicion probe (none of the consumers conveyed any cognizance of the hypothesis). When all of these items were completed consumers were debriefed, compensated with \$2 and a single use box of the detergent of their choice, and excused.

Results and Discussion

The first analyses explored whether brand positivity effects were present in consumers' stated probabilities of purchasing the focal detergent by comparing the average percentage in each condition with 25% (i.e., the null hypothesis expected value given four brands). Brand positivity effects were present in both the no prompt condition ($M = 54.0\%$), $t(39) = 5.76, p < .001$, and in the prompt condition ($M = 34.8\%$), $t(39) = 2.17, p = .04$. Because the choice intention items were highly correlated ($r = .94$), they were aggregated as in the earlier experiments. Consistent with our predictions, consumers in the no prompt condition expressed greater aggregate purchase likelihood ($M = .32$) than consumers in the prompt condition ($M = -.32$), $t(78) = 3.04, p = .003$.

Next, we considered participants' actual choices. A goodness-of-fit test demonstrated that consumers in the no prompt condition were more likely to choose the focal detergent (20 did) than would be expected by chance if the manipulation of which brand was focal was ineffectual (i.e., 10

out of 40 participants), $\chi^2(1, n = 40) = 13.333, p < .001$, thus supporting hypothesis 4a. Moreover, hypothesis 4b was supported as consumers in the no prompt condition were more likely than consumers in the prompt condition to choose the focal detergent, $\chi^2(1, n = 80) = 5.333, p = .02$. Thus, consumers' purchase likelihood judgments, as well as their actual choices, tended to favor the randomly selected focal brand.

Finally, the median consumer perceived that there were 10 brands of detergent available locally, which is quite well calibrated with the offerings of the major grocery stores in the city in which the experiment was conducted. Thus, an explanation that consumers rated brands overly positively because they were not cognizant of the number of available brands does not appear to be tenable.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The most basic aim of this article was to establish that singular evaluations of products are often characterized by a brand positivity effect in which a focal brand that is the subject of singular evaluation is judged to be more favorable than warranted. Consistent with our theorizing, unless the judgmental context inhibited the likelihood of selective processing of brand information, focal brands belonging to very different categories were perceived to be better than the average brand in the set of best brands from which the focal brands were drawn. Moreover, this judgmental tendency had implications for choice intentions and actual choice. In each experiment unless cognitive load was increased or the consideration of alternatives was prompted, the stated likelihood of purchase of the focal brand was higher than was the probability of choice of the average member of the category. In experiment 3 the focal brand was more likely to be chosen than nonfocal brands by a nonstudent sample of adult consumers.

Each of the experiments contributes to our understanding of the role of selective processing in the brand positivity effect by delineating key moderators. Generally, when the judgmental context reduced the likelihood of selective processing of brand information, the likelihood of the brand positivity effect in judgment and choice decreased. In experiment 1 both the imposition of cognitive load and prompting consumers to consider alternatives to a focal brand decreased or eliminated brand positivity effects. Experiment 2 provided direct evidence of the role of selective hypothesis testing in the brand positivity effect, as selective processing mediated the effects of prompted consideration of alternatives on judgments and choice intentions. Experiment 3 replicated the effects of prompted consideration with real choices.

Our results suggest that brand positivity effects may be most evident in decision contexts in which singular versus comparative processing is likely. If a decision context contains specified alternatives (e.g., choosing a sport coat from a clothier's rack) and involvement is high, consumers may engage in comparative processing. Judgment in such a context may be similar to that observed in the conditions in

each of the experiments in which consideration of alternatives was prompted, in which the increased likelihood of comparative processing reduced the likelihood of the brand positivity effect. In contrast, when alternatives are either not specified in context (e.g., choosing a restaurant from memory), or involvement is low, the consumer may be unlikely to consider more than a few options. In such a situation, the likelihood of selective processing in singular evaluation of an initially generated or noticed option may be high, and brand positivity effects may be particularly likely. Of course, consistent with experiment 1, if a consumer is distracted positivity effects may be less likely.

Our experiments showed that a brand that was randomly selected was typically evaluated more positively than the average of the best brands within the category. Of course, not all brands within a category are equivalent, and it is important to consider the question of which brands will be susceptible to the brand positivity effect. We suggest that the strongest brand positivity effects will be observed with regard to brands that are perceived moderately positively. As noted earlier, positivity effects will occur when the initial evaluation of a target brand is positive. When a target brand is associated with a moderately good initial evaluation, it may be misperceived to be among the best in the category due to selective processing. In contrast, a brand that is a legitimate category champion will not be susceptible to positivity effects for a simple reason—its quality or worth produces a ceiling effect. That is, although the target is likely to be perceived to be among the best brands, such a judgment would be well calibrated because the brand is truly superior.

One question that remains is the magnitude of the brand positivity effect for consumer choices made in naturalistic settings. Although experiment 3 featured a nonhypothetical choice, participants were asked to provide ratings of their choice intentions before making their choices. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that choices were influenced by consumers' ratings (cf. Feldman and Lynch 1988). Real world singular evaluations are typically not accompanied by measurement, and additional research is needed before a firm conclusion can be drawn about downstream consequences of consumers forming overly favorable singular evaluations.

Another limitation of experiment 3 is that the choice findings may be explained by economic search theory (Kohn and Shavell 1974). Specifically, it may be suboptimal to consider all available alternatives due to processing costs. If an option that is considered is above some threshold, the consumer may choose it in the belief that the option is satisfactory, and that further search will only reduce expected choice utility. Thus, any acceptable option may be likely to be chosen if it is considered first, even if attitudes toward all available options are equivalent. While we cannot definitively rule out this possibility in the choice results of experiment 3, an economic search theory explanation cannot account for our judgment data, which compellingly show that singular evaluations of focal brands are more favorable than warranted.

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Joseph Priester served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES

- Brenner, Lyle A., Derek J. Koehler, and Amos Tversky (1996), "On the Evaluation of One-Sided Evidence," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 9 (March), 59–70.
- Dhar, Ravi, Stephen M. Nowlis, and Steven J. Sherman (1999), "Comparison Effects on Preference Construction," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26 (December), 293–306.
- Feldman, Jack M. and John G. Lynch (1988), "Self-Generated Validity and Other Effects of Measurement on Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 73 (August), 421–35.
- Fitzsimons, Gavan J. and Patti Williams (2000), "Asking Questions Can Change Choice Behavior: Does It Do So Automatically or Effortfully?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 6 (September), 195–206.
- Hamill, Ruth, Timothy D. Wilson, and Richard E. Nisbett (1980), "Insensitivity to Sample Bias: Generalizing from Atypical Cases," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39 (October), 578–89.
- Hsee, Christopher K. and France Leclerc (1998), "Will Products Look More Attractive When Presented Separately or Together?" *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (September), 175–86.
- Iacobucci, Dawn and Adam Duhachek (forthcoming), "Mediation Analysis," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, ed. Barbara E. Kahn and Mary Frances Luce, Toronto: Association for Consumer Research.
- Jacoby, Larry L. (1998), "Invariance in Automatic Influences of Memory: Toward a User's Guide for the Process-Dissociation Procedure," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 124 (January), 3–26.
- Jain, Shailendra P. and Steven S. Posavac (2004), "Valenced Comparisons," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 41 (February), 46–58.
- Kahneman, Daniel and Amos Tversky (1973), "On the Psychology of Prediction," *Psychological Review*, 80 (July), 237–51.
- Kardes, Frank R., David M. Sanbonmatsu, Maria L. Cronley, and David C. Houghton (2002), "Consideration Set Overvaluation: When Impossibly Favorable Ratings of a Set of Brands are Observed," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 12 (4), 353–61.
- Klar, Yechiel and Eilath E. Giladi (1997), "No One in My Group Can Be Below the Group's Average: A Robust Positivity Bias in Favor of Anonymous Peers," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73 (November), 885–901.
- Klayman, Joshua and Young-Won Ha (1987), "Confirmation, Disconfirmation, and Information in Hypothesis Testing," *Psychological Review*, 94 (April), 211–28.
- Kohn, Meir G. and Steven Shavell (1974), "The Theory of Search," *Journal of Economic Theory*, 2 (9), 93–123.
- Mussweiler, Thomas (2003), "Comparison Processes in Consumer Judgment: Mechanisms and Consequences," *Psychological Review*, 110 (July), 472–89.
- Quattrone, George A. (1985), "On the Congruity between Internal States and Action," *Psychological Bulletin*, 98 (July), 3–40.
- Robinson, Lori B. and Reid Hastie (1985), "Revision of Beliefs when a Hypothesis Is Eliminated from Consideration," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 11 (August), 443–56.
- Sadler, Orin and Abraham Tesser (1973), "Some Effects of Salience and Time upon Interpersonal Hostility and Attraction," *Sociometry*, 36 (March), 99–112.
- Sanbonmatsu, David M., Steven S. Posavac, Frank R. Kardes, and Susan P. Mantel (1998), "Selective Hypothesis Testing," *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 5 (June), 197–220.